Why ‘sensitivity readers’ are bad for free speech, art, and culture

The publishing industry’s increasing appetite for “sensitivity readings” is a troubling development for free expression in the arts and our discourse.

by Angel Eduardo March 31, 2023

Remember censor bars? They were the black boxes often used in print and visual media to cover up words, phrases, or images deemed “inappropriate” or too “sensitive” for audiences.

The intention was to obstruct a graphic image, lewd gesture, or a taboo word. But, of course, they had the opposite effect. Nothing highlights a middle finger on TV like a big black bar, and nothing piques the interest of precocious children like redacted or bleeped out words.

But what if, rather than being covered up, they weren’t there at all? What if you read different words in your books and never even knew the original language was changed?

That’s where publishers’ growing penchant for revisionism and censorship of written works comes in — often through the use of so-called “sensitivity readers” — to eliminate “problematic” content.

You probably know Augustus Gloop from Roald Dahl’s classic “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.” He’s the “nine-year-old boy who was so enormously fat he looked as though he had been blown up with a powerful pump,” whose “great flabby folds of fat bulged out from every part of his body.”

What you may not know is that depending on what version of the book you read, Augustus and his folds aren’t “fat” or “flabby” anymore. Now he’s just “enormous,” and his folds are only “great.”

But Augustus hasn’t hit the gym recently, and his folds haven’t achieved anything noteworthy. The words “fat” and “flabby” were just deemed offensive and removed by Dahl’s publisher and estate.

This is what "sensitivity reading" does. From Roald Dahl and Ian Fleming to R.L. Stine and Agatha Christie, this trend of editing and rewriting authors' books — especially without their consent — should alarm us all. While the idea is to prevent offense and promote inclusivity, the reality is that sensitivity reading and the publishers who commission it foster a chilling effect on free speech, a sanitization of art, and a corrosion of our larger cultural discourse.

What are sensitivity readers?

Though the specifics vary between individual assignments and publishers, sensitivity readers are generally independent, freelance consultants tasked with reviewing and suggesting revisions to the content of book manuscripts.

The goal is to ensure "authenticity" if the work deals with characters, events, or themes from minority or marginalized groups, as well as to flag "offensive" material for edits. And while publishers aren't required to hire or heed the recommendations of sensitivity readers, they are doing so with increasing frequency for reasons anyone on social media will know.

Philippa Willitts, a sensitivity reader interviewed for Vice, says that her work at times focuses on determining whether "somebody has used language that some people would find offensive."

She emphasizes that her role is to provide feedback rather than to dictate changes to anyone's work — but given the current climate of online outrage, publishers are beginning to call on sensitivity readers more often and to closely follow their advice. This presents a myriad of problems both for book lovers and for a culture of free expression.

What's wrong with sensitivity readers?

Unlike, say, medical or scientific consultants, who tend to be scholars in their field and possess a breadth of academic knowledge, sensitivity readers either claim or are assumed to have expertise on what words, ideas, or language cause offense — which is hardly an academic pursuit.

This raises a number of questions: How can any given reader know what you or I might find offensive? Whose "sensitivities" are really being considered, and how are they determined? What if the preferences of two different groups, or of various people within a group, are in conflict? Who determines whose offense takes priority? What about those who are offended by the edits themselves?

Even the people doing the job can't seem to agree on what these parameters are. Orwell Prize-winning author Kate Clanchy recounts her experience working with multiple sensitivity (or "authenticity") readers for her memoir, "Some Kids I Taught and What They Taught Me." She describes the wildly varying scope, methodology, and results among them:

> One Reader fusspots around single words: I should not use "disfigure" of a landscape (infraction level 3, as presumably comparing bings — spoil heaps — to boils might be harmful to acne sufferers). Nor should I use "handicap" in its ordinary sense of "impede" (infraction level 2, serious); and I should prefer the acronym "SEN" to its origin phrase, special educational needs, because it is more inclusive (infraction level 2).
>
> Others have grander ambitions: paragraphs, sub-sections and even entire chapters should be revised. Still others focus on issues around the presentation of the book. One suggests the authors of endorsements containing the words "love" and "humanity" might want to "rethink their stance". To add to the cacophony, the Readers contradict each other freely, even praising and disparaging the same passages.

It's true that differences of opinion aren't uncommon even in more empirical fields and don't automatically disqualify the enterprise itself. However, the contradictions Clancy describes underscore the subjectivity and inconsistency of sensitivity reading, and show that nobody can ever truly be "correct" about something so nebulous as offense. For example, when Ian Fleming's James Bond novels were revised in a new edition to remove racist and insensitive language referring to African Americans, various references to people of Asian descent, women, homosexuality, and sexual assault, which could presumably be considered just as offensive, remained unchanged.

Another issue is that sensitivity readers (and their close cousins, "authenticity readers") are also purported to be experts on what constitutes the genuine "lived experience" of characters from minority or marginalized backgrounds. But how can that be true? Who decides what experiences, behaviors, and manners of speaking are "authentic" to any particular group? How can this be decided without veering into subjectivity, solipsism, racism, stereotyping, and essentialism?

Unlike a consultant who is studied in 18th-century Europe or pre-colonial South America, a sensitivity reader hired to authenticate "the black experience," for instance, has very little but their own subjectivity to work from. Again, the question is: What happens when the perspectives of different members of the same identity group are in conflict? Whose point of view should be deemed the "authentic" one? And who says a work of fiction must be "authentic" at all?

The inherent subjectivity of sensitivity reading also makes it impossible to know when the work is done. If only to justify their own jobs, sensitivity readers are incentivized to find things to flag — and there's no corrective mechanism to ensure that things don't get out of hand. As the writer and author Kat Rosenfield describes, "the practice of sensitivity reading has a way of tipping over into absurdity":

> Anthony Horowitz's new book, which features a Native American character . . . was dinged for two instances of ostensible offense. A description of a man as having a face that "could have been carved out of wood" was flagged for its alleged evocation of the wooden "cigar store Indians" that used to stand outside American tobacco shops in the 19th century. And a scene in which the character picked up a scalpel: the word "scalpel", though etymologically unrelated, just *looks* too much like the word "scalp".

> For most people, this is obviously excessive and easily dismissed as laughable, if not mystifying (cigar store Indians are such an archaic item that most Americans have never seen one). But for those who believe strongly in editing books for sensitivity, stories like this present a conundrum: to acknowledge the inanity of this particular read would be to open the door to questions about the legitimacy of the whole practice. Hence, anyone who draws attention to something like the scalp/scalpel complaint — as I did when I stumbled across the article about it — is accused of "cherry-picking", using outlier examples to slander an otherwise noble and useful profession.

Perhaps most importantly, when the standard for rewriting or revising books is the potential for outrage over the book's content, nearly every remotely interesting or engaging story we know of will meet it. This is great for the job security of sensitivity readers, but it's very bad news for art, culture, and free expression.

Given the incentives and constantly changing norms of those inclined to take offense, changing the content of books to avoid upsetting people is not only futile, but will also result in works so sanitized that they are unrecognizable to authors and likely uninteresting to readers.

The rise of sensitivity reading for published works

Much of sensitivity reading these days happens before books are released, but there is also a troubling practice of publishers retroactively revising and rewriting existing works — sometimes beloved classics.

For example, in 2023, the estate of Roald Dahl and publisher Puffin Books made numerous revisions to Dahl's language for reasons of "sensitivity" and "inclusivity." These include removing the words "fat" and "black" from visual and character descriptions throughout Dahl's books, changing a mention of now-controversial writers Joseph Conrad and Rudyard Kipling to Jane Austen and John Steinbeck, and hundreds of other modifications to Dahl's original prose.

These revisions received considerable pushback from writers like Salman Rushdie, organizations like PEN America and FIRE, and countless individual readers and fans of Dahl's work. Initially, Puffin defended the changes as "minimal," and emphasized its "significant responsibility to young readers" which prompted it to make the edits. Due to the uproar, however, the publisher eventually relented and announced that the original versions of Dahl's books would still be available to audiences who wanted them.

R.L. Stine faced an even more egregious situation. Ebook versions of his famous "Goosebumps" series were considerably revised by his publisher, Scholastic, in 2018 — five years before Stine himself even realized it happened. The popularity of e-books also presents issues for the consumer, because publishers can update the content of digital purchases at any time and without notice. This "stealth editing" of previously published and purchased content also recently happened to the work of Agatha Christie and others, and puts all of us in the position of R.L. Stine: unaware that what we're reading isn't what the author wrote.

It's bad enough that these rewrites are happening at all, but to make changes to a living author's work without his knowledge is an even more alarming act of censorship and desecration of art. It presumes, once again, that publishers and sensitivity readers know best about what content is "problematic" or "harmful." Scores of kids who grew up reading and loving these books in their original form will likely disagree on that point. If anybody, it's parents, not publishers, who should determine what their own kids may read.

Sensitivity readers keep us from thinking, learning, and growing

Some might argue that the works of these authors are outdated — that the language, ideas, and attitudes conveyed within have no place in our more modern and moral present day. But that's the thing about *the past*: It's behind us, and the vantage point we gain from looking back is deeply valuable.

As L.P. Hartley famously wrote: "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there."

If we constantly revise and rewrite our histories, we cheat ourselves out of an often enriching and educational exploration into them. When the past is erased or revised to meet our fluctuating present-day sensibilities, we may not know it exists at all.

The publishing industry's appetite for sensitivity readers and the resultant sanitization of published books threatens free expression in the arts and our culture. It conveys a message that people are too fragile and immature to understand context — to recognize that cultures, norms, and ideas change throughout history. It cheats children, in particular, out of learning and growing as a result of these important lessons, and insults their intelligence at the same time.

Perhaps most importantly, resorting to sensitivity reading and revisionism ignores the simplest solution to the problem of art you find offensive: If you don't like it, don't consume it — and don't try to force your tastes and preferences onto others.

We are experiencing a concerning confluence of cynicism on the part of publishers, who want to avoid bad press and continue to sell reprints, and our rampantly censorial culture, where recreational outrage and perpetual offense pervade. Together, these phenomena sanitize, flatten, and dull a world meant to be rich with creativity, experimentation, and growth — and that's not good for anybody.

Attempting to create art that upsets no one will only create art that engages, entertains, and inspires no one. If we wish to promote and preserve free expression, interesting and provocative art, and the ability to change culture — and to recognize that cultural change has occurred — we will have to turn our current trend toward censorship and sensitivity reading in the other direction.

© 2026 Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression
P.O. Box 40128
Philadelphia, PA 19106
fire@fire.org | 215-717-FIRE